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RUEHCI/AMCONSUL CALCUTTA 5599  
RUEHCG/AMCONSUL CHENNAI 5615  
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C O N F I D E N T I A L SECTION 01 OF 02 NEW DELHI 005266

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SUBJECT: POLLING DATA SHOWS STRONG SUPPORT FOR SONIA GANDHI

Classified By: Charge Geoff Pyatt for reasons 1.4 (B,D)

11. (C) Summary: A poll commissioned by a leading Indian news network concluded that Sonia Gandhi remains India's most popular politician, with Manmohan Singh a distant third (after former Prime Minister Atal Behari Vajpayee). According to the results, Sonia Gandhi would enjoy solid majority support if she decided to project herself as India's next Prime Minister. The poll results reinforce popular political wisdom, that the BJP/NDA does not, for now, pose a serious political threat to the UPA government. It also documents growing dissatisfaction with the UPA's performance on the economy, internal security and agricultural issues. The preference for Sonia Gandhi adds fuel to a whispering campaign that suggests the UPA would be better served with someone other than Manmohan Singh at the helm. Because India is a predominantly rural society characterized by pervasive poverty, inflation (particularly the prices of food staples) and agricultural issues predominate. Any popular perception that the government is not responsive on these issues can quickly lead to its demise. Likewise, foreign policy issues, such as relations with the US, carry little weight and generally do not decide elections. End Summary.

The CNN-IBN Poll

12. (U) A prominent Indian think tank, the Centre for the Study of Developing Societies (CSDS) conducted a survey for the CNN-IBN television network between July 16-19. It administered a questionnaire to 1,884 respondents regarding their attitudes towards Prime Minister Manmohan Singh and Sonia Gandhi and other leadership-related issues.

Sonia Most Popular Politician in India

¶3. (U) According to the survey, Sonia Gandhi is far and away the most popular political figure in the country, eclipsing Prime Minister Singh by a wide margin. When asked who they would prefer for Prime Minister if an election were held today, the breakdown was as follows:

Sonia Gandhi - 29 percent

Atal Behari Vajpayee - 21 percent

Manmohan Singh - 16 percent

LK Advani - 2 percent

Sonia Calls the Shots

¶4. (U) Fifty two percent of those surveyed supported the immediate replacement of Singh as PM with Sonia Gandhi. Despite the differences in popular support between Singh and Gandhi, 56 percent of the respondents said they remained "satisfied" with his performance. The respondents expressed admiration for Manmohan Singh's "honesty" and "wisdom," but were generally not convinced that he was a strong leader. Only 8 percent stated that he takes important decisions on his own (that is without seeking prior approval from Sonia Gandhi). Fully 22 percent of the respondents believed that Sonia Gandhi is making all important decisions in the UPA government. Forty seven percent said they had no idea who was making decisions.

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Poor Ratings on Security, the Economy and Agriculture

¶5. (U) Respondents gave the UPA government poor marks on internal security (terrorism), the economy ("price rises") and agriculture ("farmers' suicides"), with 56 percent expressing dissatisfaction over the GOI's handling of inflation, and only 22 percent saying they were "satisfied" with the UPA's performance on terrorism and "farmers suicides."

The BJP Not a Threat

¶6. (C) The survey results indicate that while the UPA does not win high marks for its performance, the BJP is held in even less regard. However, it is apparent that the BJP took note of the survey results (and likely its own polling data), when crafting its political strategy. The BJP/NDA has used the opening two days of the monsoon parliament session to hammer Congress on its purported "failure" to provide internal security and prevent terrorist attacks, and "inability" to keep down inflation or provide economic security to embattled farmers. However, the BJP is disorganized and deeply-divided, and enjoys low public confidence and may not be in a good position to benefit from its aggressive attacks. Congress remains confident that the BJP/NDA does not, for now, present a serious threat.

Economic Issues and Personal Security

¶7. (C) India is a heavily rural society dominated by pervasive poverty. It therefore comes as no surprise that the average Indian remains preoccupied with rural/agricultural issues and the prices of essential commodities. Most Indians survive from one day to the next with no margin to deal with even minute price increases in essential staples such as onions, pulses, potatoes, flour and rice. One out of every two malnourished people in the world currently live in India, with malnutrition the norm among India's poor. Any price increases in essential staples quickly eat into the family diet and cause consternation and

suffering. Should the perception become widespread that UPA economic policies are encouraging price increases in these staples, it could quickly undermine popular support for this government and provide a ready-made issue for the opposition.

Likewise, most Indians are fed up with constant terrorist attacks and the Indian police are almost universally loathed.

The polling data suggests that most Indians are skeptical that the UPA has the terrorist situation under control and is capable of providing day to day security. The survey did not include questions regarding the performance of the Left/Communist parties or provide a popularity rating for the CPI(M)'s Prakash Karat as a potential Prime Minister. The mix of issues upon which the Indian public is now focused is custom-made for the Left, which is in a better position to capitalize on them over the long term than the BJP and is causing Congress to constantly look over its left shoulder.

18. (U) Visit New Delhi's Classified Website:  
(<http://www.state.sgov.gov/p/sa/newdelhi/>)  
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